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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Lidén, G. (2014). Theories of dictatorships: sub-types and explanations. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 6(1), 50-67. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-390646>

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# Theories of Dictatorships: Sub-Types and Explanations

Gustav Lidén\*

## Abstract

Despite the third wave of democratisation, dictatorships are still a widespread global phenomenon. In recent years, comparative scholars have shown a renewed interest in such regimes, which has resulted in a significant increase in the volume of research that has been produced. However, such research is not always carried out in a cumulative fashion and, therefore, lacks the traits of a more holistic perspective. Hence, it is appropriate to review this research to try to create opportunities for more systematisation in future studies. This study does this by focusing on two approaches: that is providing definitions of non-democracies, but also developing a framework for empirical explanations of these regimes. Addressing the first approach reveals gaps in previous definitions of dictatorships, which is something that is managed by stating a theoretically founded conceptualisation. Moreover, scrutinising the typologies of dictatorships and their variants provided by previous research reveals some loosely connected or almost arbitrary alternatives. Such flaws are discussed and solutions are given. Regarding the second approach, this article discusses findings on how both the existence of and the transition to dictatorships and their variants can be systematised. The outcome is a framework that can be applied in future research. To conclude, there is still much that is unknown about both the description and the explanation of dictatorships, but by systematising recent research this article sets out a more unified strategy.

**Keywords:** dictatorship, comparative politics, political regimes, regime transitions.

## Introduction

Studying democracy is, in many ways, one of the main tasks of political scientists. This approach is motivated by the core issues of distribution of power, representation, and governance with which democracy is associated. Political scientists' traditional lack of interest in what is not democracy has, however, been unfounded (Gandhi, 2008; Karvonen, 2008). Sketching out the debate, Gandhi (2008, p. 7) notices a well-known shortcoming of the comparative field: "...leaving dictatorship as the residual category, defined only in terms of what it is not". Of course, in a world where a considerable part of the population still finds itself living in brutal regimes, a bias in favour of democracy is highly problematic. This lowers the chances of understanding why dictatorships exist, which is the term chosen for denoting non-democracies in this article, and understanding the transitions to such regimes.<sup>1</sup> However, particularly in recent years, interest in dictatorships has significantly increased, adding to the overall knowledge of what characterises these regimes, how they arise and how they endure. Yet a new problem has appeared, and scholars now see a need to create order and systematisation in a vein of research that has increased in volume, although not always in a cumulative fashion (Art, 2012; Köllner & Kailitz, 2013). There is an apparent need to review the literature in this area and thereby connect previous studies with each other to enhance the possibility of future research, building upon

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1 Obviously, there are plenty of alternatives to this term, such as autocracy and authoritarianism. Dictatorship is, though, chosen to denote all kinds of non-democratic regimes in this article.

what is already known. In this article, I review a broad set of the literature and, instead of having a general focus, delimit the article to two core issues in relation to which scholars in the field are unable to find common ground (cf. Art, 2012; Köllner & Kailitz, 2013; Pepinsky, 2013). I argue that there is a need to elucidate how dictatorships can be both defined and explained. The descriptive ambition is related to a significant example of a 'model mania' (Sartori, 1993) that has still not been resolved after twenty years. A systematic review of the main positions is, therefore, required. The explanatory ambition is to categorise explanations of dictatorships in a holistic manner, which is rarely done in studies of dictatorships. To achieve this, factors with different theoretical background operating on various spatial levels must be accounted for. All in all, the purpose of this review article is to draw from previous research and thereby provide and discuss definitions of dictatorships but also to develop a framework for empirical explanations of these regimes. To achieve the aim of this study, two research questions need to be answered.

1. How does earlier research define and describe dictatorships?
2. What factors, endogenous and exogenous in relation to societies, explain the transitions to and the existence of dictatorships?

In this way, this study lays the foundation for both a descriptive and a causal inference. Defining dictatorships in a way that provides a non-negative understanding, meaning not only being the opposite of democracy, has previously been described as problematic (e.g. Gandhi, 2008; Wahman, Teorell, & Hadenius, 2013). Coping with this would create a contribution that, together with descriptions of dictatorship, would add crucial knowledge of the social world around political regimes (Gerring, 2012a). Furthermore, by systematising and critically assessing the causal effects of explanations of dictatorships, additional leverage is provided (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994). This exercise includes distinguishing factors that are derived from 'within' a political system from those that are found outside the object under study for the purpose of increasing comparability. By taking a comparative point of departure in both theoretical and empirical inquiries about these regimes, these questions will be addressed from a critical perspective and previous research will be scrutinised.

## Defining dictatorship

The first research question will be addressed in two stages. Initially, the literature that distinguishes dictatorships from democracies will be investigated. This is followed by an examination of how different sub-types of dictatorships can be described, which results in a precise overall understanding of non-democratic regimes.

Moving away from a negative definition of dictatorship in which the emphasis is on democratic absences should be a simple task. The history of political thought is full of research that implies that it has this very ambition, ranging from Aristotle's (2000) founding discussions of political regimes to Moore's (1966) explicit approach of explaining both democracy and dictatorship. Yet defining dictatorship is by no means obvious, as the review below will show.

When democracy developed during the age of enlightenment to become a system built upon representation, the fundamental idea of democracy did not change but its institutional mechanisms did (Dahl, 1989; Dunn, 2005). Modern typologies of political regimes have one major difference from historical ones. It is a difference that is of a normative character. The distinction between good and deviant has come to be analogous to the distinction between democracy and non-democracy. All desirable forms of political regimes are democracies, and those which are not democratic contain some form of dictatorship. This dichotomisation leads the regime differentiation process on to a second concern. In other words, when a regime has been classified as either democratic or non-democratic, the next question is to determine which type of democracy (Held, 2006; Lijphart, 1999;

Schmitter & Karl, 1991) or which type of non-democracy (e.g. Geddes, 1999; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Linz, 2000) it can be classified as. No typology in the social sciences is undisputed, and much of current research has been occupied with regimes that cannot easily be categorised as either democratic or non-democratic. Different approaches are proposed (Bogaards, 2009; Diamond, 2002; Møller & Skaaning, 2010), resulting in several labels for hybrid regimes: competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010); illiberal democracies (Zakaria, 1997); and semi-authoritarianism (Ottaway, 2003). Having illustrated that political regimes that are democratic and non-democratic exist, and that there are some that have features of both forms, it is time to continue with the review of how contemporary research defines dictatorships.

One standpoint on dictatorships that theoretically must be regarded as a minimal one is present in the literature. Although it was originally argued that it was only an empirical residual category of democracy (Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, & Limongi, 2000), the actual theoretical meaning of regarding dictatorship in this way has been elaborated upon by Gandhi (2008, p. 7), who argues that this form of political regime reflects a situation in which rulers acquire power by means other than competitive elections. This standpoint, which intellectually inverts the ideas of Schumpeter (1943), has been questioned on the same grounds as its corresponding minimal definition of democracy, and the subsequent discussion of the actual validity of such an approach has been vast (Collier & Adcock, 1999; Munck & Verkuilen, 2002; Snyder, 2006).

By contrast, an alternative and expanded conception of dictatorships is given in Linz's (2000) groundbreaking work on non-democratic states. Linz's ambition was to nuance the earlier distinction between democracy and the concept of non-democracies as totalitarian states that prevailed at the time. The latter were said to have three characteristics: all major powers are based on a monistic centre, an exclusive and autonomous ideology influences the policies, and civic mobilisation is requested, encouraged, and rewarded by the ruling single party. Pioneer works focused on these dogmatic regimes (Arendt, 1968; Friedrich & Brzezinski, 1956) by specifically pinpointing totalitarianism and thereby drawing a sharp distinction between this variant and other forms of dictatorships. By using the term authoritarian and filling it with a theoretical body, Linz (2000, p. 159) brought understanding to a more empirically frequent form of non-democratic regimes, defined as:

*political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some point in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones.*

Other scholars have followed in Linz's path but have emphasised different dimensions to these conceptualisations. Although Karvonen (2008) discusses the lack of pluralism in such regimes, he also stresses the absence of civil rights and that civil society in dictatorships is permeated by the close scrutiny of citizens' movements. Thereby he complements, corresponding to how Dahl (1989) expanded the electoral definition of democracy, the understanding of how a dictatorship is also characterised by the violation of rights and basic individual freedom. In addition, for democracy a *Rechtsstat* [legal state] is necessary, since it acts predictably, in accordance with laws and the constitution, and has state capacity to implement its politics. This means that a democracy is a constitutional political system that is restricted to violating laws or the constitution. However, in dictatorships, institutions are in line with the interests of the regime and work as a method for exercising its power without regard to laws or a constitution (Diamond, 1999).

Generally, the tradition of Linz presents an alternative approach to the minimalistic ones. Although a 'thicker' description of dictatorship such as this can add details to the concept, it is not without its problems. Rather, it raises additional questions, such as: are all the factors above necessary for depicting a country as a dictatorship; can these factors be hierarchically ordered; are these dimensions

internally consistent and if so, how are they related to each other; and what is the travel capacity for this type of definition? However, the literature does not provide any clear answers to any of these questions.

To navigate between Scylla and Charybdis and handle the flaws of both too much minimalism and too much detail, a middle way between these two alternatives is proposed: *in dictatorships there are methods other than competitive elections used for distributing political power, and in such societies the political and civil rights of individuals are frequently violated*. This construction makes two properties, or qualities, necessary for classifying a country as a dictatorship, and at the same time leads to a conceptualisation that is highly universal and situated at the top of the ladder of abstraction (cf. Sartori, 1970). Such characteristics are similar to ambitions of defining democracy, or 'polyarchy', made famous by Dahl (1989). Moreover, this approach takes a balanced standpoint on the distinction between democracy, dictatorship and hybrid regimes that to a large extent has already been established in earlier research (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

However, this approach can also be criticised. One form of criticism concerns the regimes that are normally placed somewhere between democracy and dictatorship. Although they are not the focus of the article, this study notes that regimes combining characteristics from both democracies and dictatorships should, theoretically, be regarded as hybrid regimes. As noted earlier, the identification of these types of regimes is another important research field (Bogaards, 2009; Diamond, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Ottaway, 2003; Zakaria, 1997). Another criticism is put forward by Snyder (2006), who underlines how disparate this group of closed regimes is, ranging from totalitarian and post-totalitarian cases, theocracies, sultanates, personalistic regimes, and monarchies, to ethnocracies. This objection is, of course, reasonable and empirically correct. Internal heterogeneity is the obvious downside of general concepts that have great travelling capacity. In democratic theory, this has been handled through the elaboration of sub-types of democracies (Held, 2006), and this article will continue by scrutinising the analogous ambitions of dictatorships (Cheibub, Gandhi, & Vreeland, 2010; Geddes, 1999; Hadenius & Teorell, 2007; Kailitz, 2013; Wahman et al. 2013), thereby climbing down the ladder of abstraction (cf. Sartori, 1987).

## Variants of dictatorships

Deriving from Linz's noteworthy distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, an extensive field has followed that is concerned with the identification of different types of dictatorships. Later on this distinction was refined and two additional categories were added: post-totalitarian and sultanic regimes (Linz & Stepan, 1996). However, this expansion did not anticipate the criticism from contemporary research that has since abandoned this typology and described it as obsolete (Hadenius & Teorell, 2007; Snyder & Mahoney, 1999). The criticism is about the lack of generality but also points out the mismatch between these forms and the empirical reality.

Recent research in this field has been occupied with creating more valid models, and the biggest step forward during more recent years has been the identification of different sub-types. Compared to earlier research (Linz, 2000; Sartori, 1993), the updated approach is not only about theoretically important categories but is also based on an empirical point of view. Extensive data sets are associated with each of the approaches to be presented. Geddes' (1999) typology of the three variants of dictatorships is groundbreaking, and the following tradition of distinguishing among variants of dictatorships draws upon this approach.

Stating that dictatorships differ from each other as much as they differ from democracy, Geddes (1999, p. 121) builds up her argument of why their variants need to be found. The categories that are found are separated from each other on the basis of which has control over access to power, and this results in three types of dictatorships: 'personalist', 'military', and 'single-party', as well as combina-

tions of these three forms. Personalist rules are made up of regimes where the power and distribution of power is in the hands of one certain individual. In the dictatorships that are classified as military, the influence on policy is carried out by a group of officers where the military hierarchy is respected. Finally, in single-party regimes the political power is derived from a dominating party.

However, even this straightforward approach is not without classification problems. One example, as discussed by Geddes (1999) herself, is the uncertain distinction between the personalist and the military rules. The leader can have a background in the military and even wear a uniform but still be an individual leader, which legitimises the classification as a personalist rule though, since borderline cases do exist. One can then critically question the clarity of how these alternatives exclude each other. In the wake of this article, several others have focused on how to improve this typology. The following research can be separated into those contributions that see the need for modifying Geddes' typology and those that suggest different perspectives.

Hadenius and Teorell (2007) represent the first approach. Both the theoretical underpinnings and the applied data have, subsequently, been revisited to also include Wahman (2013). With the initial ambition of merely nuancing Geddes' typology, the following contribution represents a different approach that takes more of an institutional approach to the classification of regimes. Arguing that Geddes has omitted two important types of dictatorships, they launch 'monarchies' and 'electoral dictatorships'. Monarchies differ from other categories since the succession of political power is inherited inside the royal family. One could argue that there are great similarities to the personalist type of rule, but there are also crucial differences (Brooker, 2000, p. 47). Regarding the electoral forms of dictatorships, Hadenius and Teorell (2007) with Wahman (2013) increase the accuracy in Geddes' third category by letting it be constituted of three sub-groups: 'no-party', 'one-party', and 'multi-party' regimes. For these sub-types to be embedded in the definition of dictatorship, it must be stated that even if elections exist in such regimes they are neither competitive nor crucial in distributing political power.<sup>2</sup> Many dictatorships allow some sorts of, normally manipulated, elections, but the effect of these is disputed. In relation to Geddes' description of personalist rule, Hadenius and Teorell (2007) dismiss it and argue instead that it is better to treat personalism as a trait that can vary in extent among regimes. However, they give no clues on how a varying level of personalism could be implemented in the typology. A better alternative is perhaps suggested by Brooker (2000), who distinguishes between the 'traditional monarchies' and 'presidential monarchies' as a way to identify personal rulers.<sup>3</sup> In many ways, the latter category reflects the stereotypical idea of a dictator. This form better describes the ruling by despots such as Hitler or Stalin than the alternative of single-party regimes. The reason is because the dominating centre of power was not present in the ruling parties; instead, it was possessed and distributed by the dictators themselves. Classifying them as monarchies has its background in their many similarities to traditional monarchies, such as the use of rituals and symbols and the fact that the dictator regards the country as his to rule for life. One even closer likeness is when presidential monarchies develop a hereditary succession as has previously been the case in Haiti, for example, or that which still exists in North Korea (Brooker, 2000).

Also deriving from Geddes' typology, in a recent contribution Kailitz (2013) presents a slightly different perspective on how to separate dictatorships from each other. Instead of focusing on who rules, Kailitz suggests that regimes can be distinguished on the basis of how they legitimate their existence. Definitions of five types of 'full' dictatorships are reached, mainly differentiated by their ambition to legitimate their existence endogenously or exogenously in relation to the regime.

2 They are often described as a method for regimes to legitimise their government, but can also imply a step toward democratisation (Bunce & Wolchik, 2010; Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009). Empirical examinations show that the latter actually could be realised (Gandhi 2008; Teorell & Hadenius 2009) and other scholars even indicate the presence of parties in dictatorships, as a crucial feature of elections, increase prospects of democratisation (Wright & Escribà-Folch, 2012).

3 Monarchies that are constitutional are, of course, excluded from this discussion, which only concerns those regimes that can be denoted as dictatorships.

'Communist' dictatorships and 'monarchies' are found to do the latter, meaning that the regime is motivated by an overwhelming ideological cause or, alternatively, a God-given, natural or historical reason for its existence. However, it should be remembered that differentiating communist regimes, using the analogy that has previously been applied to conceptualising totalitarian regimes (Linz, 2000), reflects an approach that has been much questioned for its weak empirical connection. The same argument can also apply to what Kailitz (2013) describes as 'personalist' dictatorships, and in many ways they resemble monarchies. By contrast, 'one-party' and 'military' dictatorships appear to justify their existence through internal institutions prevailing inside the regimes. Claiming that the party or the military are essential, they create the whole founding principles of the regime. Quite arbitrarily, Kailitz also adds electoral dictatorships as something of a hybrid form, consisting of some core elements of democracy. However, the existence of elections, even though they are non-competitive, is not exclusively applied by this form of dictatorship. This would make it almost impossible to objectively settle when regimes use elections to legitimate themselves or when they lay claim to the other reasons discussed. Kailitz's approach is clearly novel, but risks low validity due to uncertainty in the theoretical framework.

In an interesting article, Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010) launch a systematised alternative to Geddes' typology.<sup>4</sup> At first sight, the resemblance seems obvious, but upon detailed examination an important form of development is shown. Not satisfied with looking at which institution in society possesses the major political power, Cheibub and colleagues place the focus on the *inner sanctum* that is related to this ruling and the actual ruler. This leads to three variants of dictatorships: 'monarchy', 'military' and 'civilian'. As discussed earlier, monarchies are characterised by the order of succession and how political power is inherited and concentrated in a royal family. Hence, Cheibub et al. (2010) neglect the distinction between the two types of monarchies that are suggested by Brooker (2000). Also, in defining military dictators, the authors have a slightly different approach. They focus not on the presence of a collective military ruling but on the fact that major political power is in the hands of a current or past member of the armed forces. In relation to other typologies, the last category *civilian* must rightly be described as vague. Based on the dichotomy of democracies and dictatorships, Cheibub et al. (2010) classify all dictatorships that are not found to be *monarchies* or *military*, as *civilian*. Arguing that the rulers in these regimes do not have a family or kin networks, or the military to rely on, the authors describe them as a separate category. The consequence of this approach is a definition that is based on the same logic as the negative definition of dictatorships and, thereby, is constituted of disparate regimes whose only common denominator is that they are neither monarchies nor ruled by the military. Reviewing the associated data set verifies such concerns and reveals how different dictatorships such as Cuba, Iran and Russia are all placed in the same *civilian* category.<sup>5</sup> Hence, there could be some challenging debate about to what extent this categorisation improves the understanding of dictatorships.

Following a review of some of the more important contemporary contributions on this topic, analytical clarity can be strengthened by an explicit comparison of different approaches. In Table 1, the four established typologies of dictatorships are presented and compared to each other. Although the theoretical motives can differ significantly between them, common traits that are found in at least three of the four typologies are highlighted. As reported by Wahman et al. (2013), the outcome also appears to be quite consistent, even though noteworthy exceptions exist. Monarchies and some forms of electoral regimes are found in three of the four typologies, while military regimes are found in all of them. Before turning to the contents of Table 1, it should be stressed that in several cases the scholars behind these typologies declare that a combinatory form can be applied as well.

4 The original data and the rules for the coding of dictatorship, distinguish them for democracies, were originally launched by Alvarez et al. (1996) and later more elaborated in Preworski et al. (2000). Based on such coding and data Cheibub et al. (2010) add precision by also distinguishing between variants of dictatorships.

5 The data was collected through The Quality of Government Institute at Gothenburg University and reflects the years 2002–2006. See: (Cheibub et al., 2010) and (Teorell, Charron, Samanni, Holmberg, & Rothstein, 2011).



**Table 1:** Comparing typologies of dictatorships

Geddes (1999)	Hadenius & Teorell (2007) & Wahman et al. (2013)	Kailitz (2013)	Cheibub et al. (2010)
	Monarchy	Monarchy	Monarchy
Personalist		Personalist	
Military	Military	Military	Military
Single-Party	Electoral no-party one party limited multi party	Electoral  One-party autocracy	
		Communist	Civilian

Source: author’s compilation

Geddes (1999) is the only scholar who does not distinguish a ‘monarchy’ as a certain form of dictatorship; instead, she includes such regimes in the broader concept of personalist rule.<sup>6</sup> Arguments from the other contributions about the importance of monarchies, in which the head of state inherits their position, points to a sub-type which is fairly easy to distinguish, and this raises questions about why Geddes proposes the much vaguer alternative of personalist rule. Kailitz (2013, p. 49), on the other hand, presents the only typology which includes both of these categories, separating personalist rule from monarchies by claiming that they do not have such a strong original justification as monarchies. In general, the outlining of the ‘personalist’ category seems unclear. Besides the inconsistency of the varying degree of personalism, as pointed out by several authors (Brooker, 2000; Hadenius & Teorell, 2007), neither Geddes nor Kailitz present clear rules on how to identify such regimes. This is a drawback of these two typologies, which enhance the risk of creating vague categories that are not solidly founded on previous research.

Military dictatorships are found in all typologies. Even if the theoretical arguments vary in relation to identifying the rulers’ backgrounds, the inner sanctum of governing and methods for legitimising power, some form of coherence seems to exist. It can reasonably be argued that all four typologies propose legitimate conceptual grounds for this category, although emphasising the importance of a military background and respect for internal hierarchies perhaps best captures the intended meaning. Moreover, there are some apparent connections between regimes that allow a party or even several parties and admit elections as a way of legitimising the regime. As noted in recent research, elections in dictatorships, although they are not by definition free, are frequent (Wahman, 2012). The typologies of Hadenius, Teorell, and Wahman (2013) are most detailed in this matter, distinguishing between three forms of electoral dictatorships. Although this reflects an ambitious approach, a classification this narrow risks being so detailed that it becomes idiosyncratic. That is, there is a probability of facing the same dilemma for which Hadenius and Teorell themselves (2007, p. 144) criticised Linz and Stepan’s typology.<sup>7</sup> If this is a potential problem for them, the same could apply to Geddes (1999), who applies a quite specific categorisation of single-party regimes instead of deriving from

6 However, in an unpublished manuscript, Geddes, together with Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz, launches an updated version of the data, this time also distinguishing monarchies from other types of dictatorships. Since no published works have been, until now, based on this data, it is hard to evaluate their quality.

7 A closer look at the data set verifies this assumption. In 2010 only 7 countries were classified as one-party regimes, while 61 were classified as multi-party regimes. Even more problematic is that only Haiti and the Maldives have been classified as analogous to the third category, no-party regimes for the entire time span of 1972–2010. Since 2004 no country in the data set has been classified as a no-party regime, making contemporary empirical examinations of this category pointless. See: Hadenius and Teorell (2007) and Wahman et al. (2013).



the broader concept of electoral dictatorships. Kailitz (2013) reaches something of a middle way. His concept of electoral dictatorship entails a multi-party system, which should be distinguished from one-party regimes and liberal democracies, though this is a task that would be fraught with practical ambiguities. This ambiguity in previous research poses problems and no given answers are found to this. If elections are applied to legitimise a regime (Kailitz, 2013), functioning as ‘Potemkin villages’, it would be relevant to account for this specific strategy in a typology with a more generic approach that does not risk connection to the real situation.

A final comment should be made about the two categories that are hard to put together with similar ones. Kailitz (2013) argues that communist regimes make up a specific type of dictatorship. Ideologically they can, of course, differ from one-party dictatorships. However, it is hard to find any substantial reasons as to in which way such regimes differ from other one-party regimes that perhaps are plagued by other forms of dominating ideologies, or in which a party rules without any guiding ideology. Furthermore, the transitions of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century obviously lower the relevance of such an approach. From an opposing perspective, Cheibub et al. (2010) have a hard time convincing readers about what, analytically, unites the civilian form of dictatorships more than not being any of the other forms. Besides defending this category as the outcome of a clear-cut way of coding, their arguments seem quite tenuous.

To conclude, it seems appropriate to refer to the model mania (cf. Sartori, 1993) that has previously been a suitable way of describing the approaches that distinguish totalitarian and authoritarian regimes from each other as now being opposed to the updated version of variants of dictatorships. However, one solution to this problem, which is launched in this article, is to refocus future research on the four categories that represent the common denominator for the majority of the reviewed typologies. In other words, since most scholars seem to agree upon the division of sub-types into *monarchy*, *military* and *electoral* or *party* regimes, this appears to be a suitable strategy for future ambitions. These variants are ones that are founded on those theoretical assumptions that can be regarded as being the least problematic.

## Explaining regimes: the existence of and transitions to dictatorships

A decisive characteristic of social sciences is that mere descriptions of the social world are not sufficient. Instead, explanations, that is, reaching causal inferences about social phenomena, are necessary (Gerring, 2012b; King et al. 1994). The first part of the aim of this article, responding to the first research question, which has ambitions of reaching descriptive inference, has now been addressed. It is now possible to approach the second research question, that is, to address a comparative question about how such political regimes can be explained.

Throughout the modern history of researching political regimes, mainly democracy, there has surprisingly often been confusion regarding, on the one hand, the existence of and, on the other hand, the transition to the type of regime in focus. It did, however, take thirty years until research that seriously considered this distinction was carried out. Przeworski et al. (2000) not only noted the difference between these two dimensions but also gave empirical proof to questions of both the existence or survival of democracy and the transition to it. An undertaking to examine these questions considers the explanations of both stability and transition. When it comes to explaining dictatorships, the same logic should be applied, and adding the dynamic from the review of sub-types of political regimes, a battery of questions appears to be legitimate (see Table 2). This generic table describes different potential research strategies and is mostly connected to purposes and research designs and not to any specific theoretical or empirical points of departure. However, an implicit function of this framework is that the analytical precision increases when shifting to approaches that are listed in the right-hand column of the table.

Table 2: A framework for explaining dictatorships

	Dictatorships	Sub-types of dictatorships
Existence	1. What factors explain the existence of dictatorships?	2. What factors explain the existence of sub-types of dictatorships?
Transition	3. What factors explain the regime change to or from dictatorships?	4. What factors explain the regime change to or from sub-types of dictatorships?

Source: author’s compilation

Table 3: A summary of explanations of dictatorships

Explanations are derived from:	Type of explanation	Hypotheses	Key references
Inside the political system	3 & 4	H <sub>1</sub> : Dictatorships that are institutionalised (parties) are less brutal and will lead to democracy.	Gandhi (2008); Wright & Escribá-Folch (2012); Huntington (1968); Pepinsky (2013)
	1	H <sub>2</sub> : Institutionalisation explains the existence of dictatorships.	
	3 & 4	H <sub>3</sub> : Dictatorships that are institutionalised (elections) can transform to democracies.	Bunch & Wolik (2010); Teorell & Hadenius (2009)
	4	H <sub>4</sub> : Military dictatorships have the greatest risk of falling to democracy, while single-party regimes have the lowest.	Brownlee (2007)
Inside society	3	H <sub>5</sub> : Economic crises will promote transitions towards dictatorships.	Przeworski et al. (2000)
	1	H <sub>6</sub> : High level of inequality cements dictatorships.	Boix (2003)
	1 & 3	H <sub>7</sub> : The possession of valuable natural resources explains the existence of and transition to dictatorships.	Ross (2001); Ross (2012)
	1	H <sub>8</sub> : The existence of Islam explains the existence of dictatorships.	Anckar (2012)
Outside society	3	H <sub>9</sub> : Economic interventions promote transitions towards dictatorships.	Teorell (2010)
	1 & 3	H <sub>10</sub> : The more democracies there are as neighbours, in the region or in the world, the lower is the chance that a dictatorship will survive; while a high proportion of dictatorships among neighbouring countries can lead to transitions to dictatorships.	Gleditsch & Ward (2006); Starr & Lindborg (2009); Starr (1991)
	1	H <sub>11</sub> : Close linkage with other dictatorships will increase possibilities for survival of a dictatorship.	Ambrosio (2010)
Temporal dimension	1	H <sub>12</sub> : Non consolidated democracies risk being transitioned to dictatorships.	Svolik (2008)
	1	H <sub>13</sub> : Long-lasting consolidated dictatorships are more likely to survive as dictatorships.	Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, and Morrow (2003)

Source: author’s compilation

Turning to the review of explanations of dictatorships, Karvonen’s (2008) statement about the absence of a comprehensive theoretical model creates a necessary point of departure. The lack of holistic theoretical contributions about why and how dictatorships come into being and survive creates uncertainty for additional research (for a recent exception see Ezrow & Frantz, 2011). However, this shortcoming is not related to there not being enough studies, but rather originates from a failure

to systematise varying *explanans* of dictatorships. Regarding the research that does exist on this topic, it varies between theoretical results and empirical results. One suitable way to present it is to distinguish between where different approaches have their analytical background. Deriving from Lidén (2011), three levels are found from where factors may originate. These three are of a spatial character. The first level refers to characteristics from the political system. By contrast, the second approach is based on factors external to the given society's political system but still found inside the society in question. Collectively, these two alternatives are considered *endogenous* in relation to the study object because the determinants are extracted from within. The third level refers to explanations that are found outside the concerned society and, therefore, are *exogenous* in relation to the society. A temporal dimension can also be added that is related to the importance of the development of time. By building on the classification shown in Table 2, Table 3 presents a compilation of explanations of dictatorships in form of hypotheses from the most relevant research in this field. The criteria that are applied to selecting these hypotheses are that factors that are built upon both convincing theoretical as well as empirical results are selected to be included in the systematisation. Following what is presented in Table 3, I will set out references in the text to those claims that are well grounded in research and are, therefore, included in the systematisation.

## Endogenous explanations of dictatorships: Inside the political systems

The first level includes political institutions. By setting the boundaries for political systems, institutions influence political processes by having relevance to both creating and shaping policies. Recently, something of an 'institutional turn' has arisen in which scholars of dictatorships have emphasised the importance of such factors in explanatory approaches (Pepinsky, 2013). A powerful example is provided by Møller & Skaaning (2011) who, in a recent article, show how the existence of 'stateness', that is, state monopoly over the use of force and citizens' support for the nation-state, appears to be a crucial factor for several of the characteristics of democracy. Likewise, it can be assumed that similar institutions play a significant role in the phase of transition to dictatorships, as well as their state of durability. As expected, several scholars have agreed with such assumptions, although the outcome is contested. Regarding a perspective on how institutions obstruct dictatorship, the main argument is that institutionalisation in such regimes can imply the approval of at least some allowed political engagement that could be expected to result in a demand for increased civil rights (Gandhi, 2008, p. 138). It has been suggested that these ideas, in the form of hypotheses, affect transitions of regime types, on a general level and for sub-types. Gandhi (2008, p. 123) measures institutions by the number of political parties in the legislature, and finds that institutionalised dictatorships are more tolerant of civil liberties, meaning that more brutal dictatorships do not, in general, include these institutions. Hence, hypothesis 1 is derived. Wright and Escribá-Folch (2012) add specification to the argument by showing how the presence of parties increases the chances for democratisation in military and dominant-party regimes, while the effect of parties in personalist dictatorships is actually a transition towards another form of dictatorship. The fact that the latter finding has not been elaborated by the authors, makes a critical interpretation relevant; deriving from an assumed heterogeneity among personalist regimes, it thereby puts into question whether similar types of regimes actually are compared. Shifting to the opposite idea, that the level of institutionalisation instead results in enduring dictatorships, can have different backgrounds. It is either based on the notion of the stability and efficiency that these institutions could bring (Huntington, 1968) or on a completely different perspective in which institutions are only regarded as instruments for their creators, the ruling elite, and therefore they do not have the possibility of influencing political processes independently (Pepinsky, 2013). On the basis of the aforementioned points, hypothesis 2 is reached.

Still focusing on movements of transitions, and specifically considering elections in dictatorships as one form of institutionalising, arguments show how these can be used to co-opt elites, party members or the opposition and thereby lower the risk of violent removals of the steering elite (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009). Through a massive test of different sets of explanations, Bunce and Wolchik (2010) expose the mechanisms and stress how an opposition in collaboration with civil society groups and with the support of external democracy activists could result in a transition to democracy through the functioning of elections. Combining this with some of the elements of ambitious campaigns and initiatives for electoral monitoring procedures gives hope for victory and can thereby attract voters. This makes it much harder for the previous regime to stay in office if it actually loses. The combination of the traits of the national institutions and external influence is in accordance with the conclusion of Levitsky and Way (2010). However, additional empirical evidence is quite unclear. Teorell and Hadenius (2009) prove that elections can promote democratisation, while Wahman (2013) notes that the alternation of an incumbent regime through elections is only a short-lived democratic effect. Nevertheless, deriving from the elaborated theoretical assumptions above and from this potential effect, hypothesis 3 theorises that institutionalised dictatorships are inclined to transition to democracies.

Another characteristic of a political system is how the political regime can be classified and different sub-types of dictatorships are, in themselves, potential explanations of transitions. The different types of dictatorships have been used here both as *explanans* and *explanandum*. Kailitz (2013) provides data for the average lifespan of regimes and finds that military regimes are among the most short-lived, verifying results from Geddes (1999), but he also finds a tendency that is similar to that found in the data of Hadenius & Teorell (2007). Brownlee (2007) expands this and verifies the findings that show a short endurance of military regimes, while also noting that single-party regimes are the most long-lasting ones. Hypothesis 4 accounts for this.

## Endogenous explanations of dictatorships: Inside society

Turning to the second level, there is a long tradition of research that focuses on explanations of dictatorships that are found in the surrounding society. Such examples are the outcome of society's internal balance of power (Moore, 1966), which can be connected with how modernisation can create an unholy alliance between political and economical elites (O'Donnell, 1973). Later on, Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) partly revise Moore's famous standpoint on the role of the bourgeoisie as a trigger of democratisation, adding that their role in the process of democratisation varied from case to case and time period to time period, being more ideographic than nomothetic. Among the more quantitatively oriented research, Wright's (2008) is a good example of a study in which Geddes' variants of dictatorships are not used as independent variables but as dependent ones. The analysis is carried out with one-party regimes as the reference category. The results show that personal dictatorships have a positive correlation with oil reserves and revenues and a negative one with national investments and population. The same relationships apply for monarchies, but in addition these societies are more ethnically fragmented and dominated by Islam to a greater extent. For military dictatorships the picture is the opposite, meaning that they are neither dependent on oil, nor are they ethnically fragmented. However, they are more populated than one-party regimes. Wright's article has an explicit approach to dictatorships but has deficiencies in the lack of non-dictatorships as reference. Without the possibility of a comparison with democracy, plausible hypotheses are hard to deduct.

With the groundbreaking research of Przeworski and colleagues (2000), results that challenged earlier ideas of regime explanations hit the field. By using a measurement that derives from a theoretical dichotomisation of democracy and dictatorship, explanations of the latter category were introduced. By summarising their findings regarding both the survival and transitions of regimes, two points can

be made. As regards earlier research, the result of showing the existence of dictatorships irrespective of economic conditions is, of course, surprising. Moreover, regime transitions to dictatorship are proven to be accompanied by economic crisis. This theoretical statement, with associated empirical proof, is picked up as hypothesis 5. Hence, economic factors affect the transition but not the existence or survival of a dictatorship (Przeworski et al., 2000, pp. 109-111). These highly discussed results have, however, been questioned. By extending the time-series, adding control for extraneous variation and using additional techniques of estimation, several authors add clarity (Boix & Stokes, 2003; Boix, 2011; Epstein, Bates, Goldstone, Kristensen, & O'Halloran, 2006). Epstein and his colleagues even argue that the outcome has been misinterpreted and shows that economic development is significant when it comes to regime changes in both directions. More concretely, high levels of GDP covary with transitions to democracy, while low values are significant in transitions to dictatorships. This leads on to an alternative approach to the question of regime outcome, often denoted as the economic approach, which applies the ideas and methods of political economy (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; Wintrobe, 1998). Building on models in which actors, policy and regime type are the central entities, questions about what determines regime outcome are asked. It is argued, as sketched out by Boix (2003), that it is not the economic level but the distribution of income that is the crucial factor. As summarised in hypothesis 6, it is assumed that dictators prevail in highly unequal societies in which the transition to democracy would put demands of redistribution and heavy taxation on the wealthy. The ruling elite and its wealthy associates therefore have strong incentives to block democracy. Empirically, Boix (2003) adds some rare empirical examples to this tradition, showing how among poorer countries, equal income distribution positively affects the probability that dictatorships will transition to democracy, and also argues for the importance of distribution of assets for democracy after conducting case studies of the federal states of the U.S. and the cantons of Switzerland.

Among other important results in the comparative literature, the possession of valuable natural resources can cement dictatorships. Rentier effects, where the wealth from oil or minerals can be used to keep the population loyal, or where the income can be invested in police or military forces to more efficiently control opposition to the regime, is listed by Ross (2001), who has noticed that these resources prevent democracy. These results are followed up in more recent research, in which Ross (2012) emphasises how a country's income of oil is robust in explaining the survival of dictatorships as well as explaining the transition to a dictatorship. The oil effect is limited in time, however, and has been of greatest importance since 1980. Using other forms of estimations, the reported results are ambiguous, either supporting the findings of Ross (Aslaksen, 2010) or questioning them (Haber & Menaldo, 2011). Nevertheless, these results yield assumptions about both the existence of and the transition to dictatorships, as presented in hypothesis 7. Among other characteristics in societies, scholars have pleaded for addressing the importance of religion (Anderson, 2004; Fox, 2001; Minkenberg, 2007) in relation to political regimes. Stepan (2005) has underscored that the two dimensions of religion and politics must be kept separated to avoid the risk that religious institutions might have an influence on the decision-making process. Anckar's empirical study (2012) shows how authoritarian features in Islam create intolerance toward democratic values. Hence, hypothesis 8 sets out that societies dominated by Islam have a greater chance of surviving as dictatorships and that this could be due to shortcomings in separating the political sector from religious beliefs.

## Exogenous explanations of dictatorships

The third level of explanation is exogenous in relation to the studied objects, and states that phenomena outside countries affect their political orientation. These types of explanations do, however, need to conform to domestic forces (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 73). Theoretically known as Galton's problem, the spreading of ideas has been studied both with geographical and more traditional comparative

approaches. Previously under-theorised, scholars have tried to examine how such processes can affect established dictatorships or influence the transition to such regimes (Ambrosio, 2010; Elkins, 2011). Ambrosio argues that both the appropriateness of global attitudes towards democracy or dictatorship and the effectiveness of policymakers in benchmarking other countries' experiences can be mechanisms that explain the outcome of regimes. Turning to the empirical examples, O'Loughlin et al. (1998) prove that dictatorships, as well as democracies, are geographically clustered. The importance of exogenous factors has also been emphasised by research that simultaneously examines these explanations with control for domestic ones. Of particular interest for reaching testable hypotheses is Teorell's (2010) study that examines democracy and dictatorship from the perspectives of both transition and survival, resulting in hypothesis 9. Among the exogenous factors, results show that economic interventions from foreign powers actually only lead to a strengthening of the path towards dictatorship. Thus, there is a risk that quite the opposite to the desired outcome happens. Moreover, Brinks and Coppedge (2006) find empirical evidence that neighbouring countries are similar when it comes to political regimes, even when other, earlier discussed factors, are controlled for. With similar control for country-specific factors, Gleditsch and Ward (2006) find that a high proportion of democratic neighbours lowers the chance that a dictatorship will survive. This is quite analogous to previous findings concerning the transition to dictatorships (Starr & Lindborg, 2003; Starr, 1991), which have shown that this is more likely to arise if neighbouring countries are also dictatorships. Hence, both existence and transition are expressed in hypothesis 10. However, as stated by other scholars (Ambrosio, 2010), not only geographical distance but other forms of linkages, such as economic and political ones, and others, can affect regime outcome. This specification is captured in hypothesis 11. Operating with the opposite causal direction, scholars (Gleditsch, 2002; Wejnert, 2005) emphasise that diffusion factors on both a regional and global level have an importance for democratisation.

Before summing up, a type of explanation that cannot be categorised as spatial, needs to be brought up. Svobik (2008) has shown that it is important to identify regimes that are consolidated. Regimes that have been democracies for a long time only have a negligible risk of turning into a dictatorship. This means that one central determinant of consolidation is the length of time that the regime has been democratic; therefore, the temporal dimension should not be forgotten and is expressed in hypothesis 12. Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003) stress that consolidated dictatorships that have survived for more than five years have a higher chance of surviving. The greatest challenge for a new dictatorial regime is to stay in office for the first few years; thereafter, the risk of deposition declines sharply. Therefore, hypothesis 13, in which time is applied as a determinant of consolidation, can be deducted.

## Summarising explanations of dictatorships

All in all, explanations of dictatorships are possibly found on three spatial levels and one temporal dimension. The review of literature does, however, show that the dominating part of the deducted hypotheses reflects the survival of or transitions to dictatorships, and where only two hypotheses give information about the sub-types of these dictatorships.<sup>8</sup> In summary, this review implies that there are no coherent theoretical models for explaining dictatorship as is common in the literature of democracy and democratisation (e.g. Sørensen, 2008).

As the systematisation implies, there are a number of major schools that are occupied with the explanation of dictatorship. For this approach, division has been made spatially to allow comparisons. First, the importance of political institutions has clearly emerged as a main field when the focus is

<sup>8</sup> Additional hypotheses regarding transitions to and survival of sub-types of dictatorships can be found in the literature (Ezrow & Frantz, 2011; e.g. Linz & Stepan, 1996) but they either appear to be speculative or based upon ideas of variants of dictatorships that are found to be obsolete today.



also directed towards dictatorships. In contrast to previous research (Huntington, 1968), the general proposal is that through the existence of an electoral or party system, institutionalisation can lead to transitions to democracy (Gandhi, 2008; Teorell & Hadenius, 2009; Wright & Escribà-Folch, 2012). Second, economic development and the traits of the economic sector still represent a dominant school but also a tradition under amendment. Przeworski et al. (2000) state that economic crises can lead to transitions to dictatorships, while others are more concerned with the distribution of economic resources (Boix, 2003) or their origin (Ross, 2001, 2012). Third, the external influence of dictatorships has recently been given particular attention. Teorell (2010) has proved that economic sanctions are risky, while Gleditsch and Ward (2006) and Ambrosio (2010) focus on geographical proximity as a potential factor that relates to the outcome of regime endurance and potential transitions. It is necessary to account for all of these theoretically and empirically valid results and their different relations with endurance or transitions when reaching future explanations of dictatorships and their sub-types.

## Conclusions

This article has reviewed the literature of two related areas, corresponding to the two research questions. The contribution of each section will be discussed in turn, and finally the combined value will be addressed.

On reviewing previous research, this article has noted gaps in the definition of dictatorships and contributed by trying to fill some of them. By compiling earlier contributions to the issue of how to properly define dictatorships, a theoretical innovation is reached by providing a definition of dictatorships. This states that dictatorships use methods other than competitive elections to distribute political power and that they also frequently violate individuals' political and civil rights. This conceptualisation contrasts with how liberal democracies are defined (Dahl, 1989; Diamond, 1999) and, thus, creates a consistent way of separating the two main forms of regime types from each other without describing dictatorship merely as the opposite of democracy. In addition, it leaves room for further differentiation of hybrid regimes (Brownlee, 2007; Diamond, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2010). Furthermore, the review of different types of dictatorships points out both the advantages of and the flaws in the most comprehensive approaches to the identification of sub-type regimes. Addressing unclear or almost arbitrary strategies, such as in the classification of personalist (Geddes, 1999) or civilian (Cheibub et al., 2010) regimes, is argued to be deficient of conceptual validity. Correspondingly, other approaches, such as the classification of no-party regimes (Hadenius & Teorell, 2007; Wahman et al., 2013), fall short of creating categories that are empirically relevant. The presented suggestion can avoid several of these shortcomings by refocusing research into three sub-types of dictatorships: monarchies, military, and electoral or party regimes.

Second, by discussing the findings on how both the existence of and the transition to dictatorships and their variants can be systematised, a framework that can be applied in future research is studied. However, the inquiry in this area gives rise to several questions. One of the main results in this article is the identification of a shortcoming in the comprehensive way of explaining sub-types of dictatorships. Hence, it is correct to argue that current research in this field neither gives thorough clues about how different variants of dictatorships endure nor about how they arise. Consequently, a plea for studies on this topic arises out of this article. Furthermore, some studies concerning the head category of dictatorship are contradictory. Take, for example, the issue of the effects of elections in dictatorships on regime durability. While Teorell and Hadenius (2009) report that the occurrence of elections can promote democratisation, Brownlee (2007) states the opposite. Such ambiguous results reflect an issue in research that is far from settled. In general, 'the democratic bias' is a natural reason for this outcome, since it permeates many of the explanatory studies that have been reported on in



this article. This creates a situation in which the existence of and transitions to dictatorships should be understood as the residual, creating very unlikely chances of reaching any causal inference. Clearly, this affects this field of research and clashes especially hard with the will to increase knowledge of sub-types of dictatorships, since in such approaches they can scarcely be distinguished from each other.

To conclude, the increasing amount of research that focuses on dictatorships must be much applauded. However, much is still unknown and not settled, particularly in the area of explanation of regime studies. By systematising previous research and assessing both the description and explanation layers, the scientific inquiries of tomorrow can be created. When answers to those inquiries have been found, we will be better able to ensure that political science can give feedback to decision-makers on how dictatorships can be understood and explained.

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### Acknowledgments

I thank Lauri Karvonen, Carsten Anckar and Thomas Denk for valuable comments. An earlier version of this text was presented at the annual meeting of the Swedish Political Science Association at Umeå University, 27-28 October 2011.